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# Reading and reassessing the construction of gender and sexuality in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*: A Biography

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Reading and Reassessing the  
Construction of Gender and Sexuality  
in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of  
Loneliness* and Virginia Woolf's  
*Orlando: A Biography*

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Established writers Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf respectively published *The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando: A Biography* within a few months of each other in 1928. These novels were both experimental and radical in their own rights, but were received differently: Hall's was labeled as obscene and then banned, while Woolf's was praised, and brought her both critical and financial success.

In Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, the protagonist is Stephen Gordon, who is understood to be a sexual invert; Stephen grows up in England during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was when sexuality, notably homosexuality, became a subject of scientific discussion and study. We see Stephen struggle to come to terms with her identity as an outsider, as well as with her two romantic relationships: her first with the married Angela Crosby, which is never consummated, and the second, longer relationship with Mary Llewellyn, whom Stephen meets while serving in the First World War. Soon after its publication, the novel was put on trial under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 for its use of a homosexual protagonist, and subsequently outlawed (Doan and Prosser 1).

Published only a few months after *The Well of Loneliness* was Virginia Woolf's playful, modernist text *Orlando: A Biography*, which is a fictional, mock-biography. The novel begins during the Renaissance, where we meet Orlando as a young man. When the novel closes, the action of the plot has reached 1928, or the date of *Orlando's* publication, and Orlando is a married woman in her thirties. Woolf shows that Orlando's

body is defined by neither time nor gender, as in the seventeenth century Orlando changes physically from a man into a woman.<sup>1</sup>

While both novels were revolutionary, Woolf and Hall were very different writers: while Hall experimented on the level of content and subject matter, Woolf took risks on both plot and writing-style, and she was already a well-known and celebrated author for these reasons. Woolf, a modernist and experimental in her fiction writing, was a core member of the elite “Bloomsbury group.” Alongside other important critics, artists, and intellectuals, she discussed contemporary issues and art while questioning the societal ideals of the past and how they could shape the future; some of their main concerns included questions along the lines of: “What new work can be done, what kinds of lives and marriages and thoughts are now possible for women, and for the young? What connections are there between conventions in behaviour and conventions in art?” (Lee 258). The “Bloomsbury group” became well known as a “particularly vivid and influential embodiment” of modernism and the changes in English culture that occurred during Woolf’s lifetime (Lee 258).

*The Well of Loneliness*, on the other hand, represents a textual departure from the heterosexual romance, as it features the struggles of a protagonist who does not represent the idealized woman of her time. Jonathon Cape, the novel’s publisher, and Leopold Hill’s appeal after the trial clearly sums up the importance and radicalism of the novel, writing that *The Well of Loneliness*:

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<sup>1</sup> The protagonist’s gender pronouns in *Orlando* and in critical writing on *Orlando* require particular attention, as they change after Orlando’s gender transition. He/his/his pronouns will be used in this essay when referring to Orlando’s life as a man, or before his transition. She/her/hers pronouns will be used when referring to Orlando as a woman, or Orlando’s life as a whole, as Orlando is a woman at the finish of the novel.

is concerned with the phenomenon of the masculine woman in all its implications. The novel handles very skillfully a psychological problem which needs to be understood in view of its growing importance. In England hitherto the subject has not been treated frankly outside the region of scientific textbooks, but that its social consequences justify a broader and more general treatment is likely to be the opinion of thoughtful and cultured people. (qtd. in Dellamora 189)

While this statement is troublesome in its labeling of gender inversion as “a physiological problem,” this misunderstanding proves why literature like *The Well of Loneliness* needed to exist. Cape and Hill also carefully justify the merits of novels like *The Well of Loneliness*: there were readers now searching for narratives that included a broader range of people, and people who weren’t strictly heterosexual were dissatisfied with their lack of representation in art.

A common thread in what makes these novels revolutionary is their treatment and construction of gender and sexuality. Both Woolf and Hall dare to directly critique the gender binary in new and inventive ways. They use some of the same tools to do so, such as implying the novel idea that societal conventions such as clothing are what make a woman, not the physical body. More uniquely, both Hall and Woolf create protagonists who are female writers, and they succeed in illuminating some of the difficulties of being a female writer in late nineteenth and early twentieth century British society, an issue close to Hall and Woolf themselves.

In 1928, the relationships between gender identification, sexuality, and one’s biological sex were often misinterpreted. A common misconception was that biological sex would predict one’s gender identification and sexual orientation (Butler 519). Therefore, much of the discourse on *The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando*’s treatment of gender and sexuality has been misconstrued. For instance, *The Well of Loneliness* is often referred to as a quintessential lesbian novel. In an effort to gain credibility for her

protagonist, Hall used sexologist Havelock Ellis' work to shape her characterization of Stephen, so that Stephen would follow perfectly the guidelines set forth from the contemporary beliefs of sexology (Newton 566-567). However, Ellis' work states that the gender identification with the opposite sex will lead to homosexual desire, and this conflation of gender identification and sexuality is now outdated. In 2015, the novel is better represented as a transgender novel, specifically in the context of gender dysphoria (DSM-5). In *Orlando*, on the other hand, the protagonist's change from a male to a female body raises the question as to whether the novel should be regarded as transgender. Unlike Stephen, Orlando does not experience gender dysphoria. However, Orlando is not defined or restricted by one gender identity, and this experience falls under the broader definition of the term "transgender."

#### *The Well of Loneliness's* obscenity trial

On August 19, 1928, less than a month after the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, James Douglas' article "A Book That Must Be Suppressed" appeared in the *Sunday Express*, stating: "I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul...Fiction of this type is an injury to good literature. It makes the profession of literature fall into disrepute" (Douglas 38). Since the book's publication on July 27, 1928, the reviews were otherwise positive; however, after reading Douglas' article, Sir William Joynson-Hicks brought the novel to trial using the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. After the subsequent trial, led by Judge Sir Chartres Biron, the United Kingdom banned

the novel (Doan and Prosser 1). Calling it “propaganda,” Attorney General T.W.H. Inskip “experienced difficulty in finding offensive descriptions of sexual ‘practices’ in the novel. Instead, the obscenity of the book consisted in its construction of marriage” (Dellamora 197, 202). Indeed, it is clear that Stephen’s inability to legally marry either Angela Crossby or Mary Llewellyn, the two women that she has sustained romantic relationships with over the course of the novel, is what ultimately ends both of these relationships:

Hall’s polemical point [is] that in 1928, a female lover could not offer another woman emotional and financial security in a publically recognized relationship. Implicitly, if the Stephens of this world are to have a chance at fashioning durable relationships with female partners, change is required that would create civil and religious sanctions in support of such unions. (Dellamora 198-199)

Along with Hall’s advocacy for homosexual marriage, Judge Biron found Hall’s writing style to be problematic in its matter-of-factness: “[Biron] suggests that Hall provoked the British authorities into legal action by preaching an unacceptable sexual doctrine in an earnest tone that sought to deny the possibility of either language or moral censure” (Parkes 434). Unlike Woolf’s *Orlando*, *The Well of Loneliness* is not a modernist novel, but is instead a traditional novel rooted in realism that contains a “Victorian narrative concern with the social and material milieu” (Green 278). The novel is straightforward, and its audience clearly understood its objectives. Therefore, in December of 1928, *The Well of Loneliness* was officially banned (Doan and Prosser 1).

Marriage and male protection in *The Well of Loneliness*

The novel's trial cited Hall's campaign for same-sex marriage as one of the book's most profane aspects. However, Hall's idea of homosexual marriage retains traditional male and female gender roles (though not traditional male and female bodies). While her advocacy for homosexual marriage was still considered shocking by Hall's contemporaries, *The Well of Loneliness* presents lesbian marriage in a manner that includes a traditional "masculine" and a traditional "feminine" role:

[Hall's] hope for the future was to see inverts able to marry, so that they could be judged by conventional—that is, heterosexual—standards. Lesbian relationships, Hall thought, should conform to the normal pattern found around heterosexuals, that of the aggressive male and the passive female—the protector and the protected...Stephen Gordon [is framed] within the conventions of the heterosexual romance. Stephen adopts the aggressive male role. (Parkes 442)

Hall is, therefore, not radical in her views of how a marriage should function, but radical in whom she thinks a marriage can include. In fact, much of what was viewed as revolutionary throughout the novel operates within the conventionalities of the 1920s. Hall viewed gender roles in a traditional manner, with the power belonging in the hands of the male; Hall said: "In the heart of every woman is the desire for protection. In the heart of every man is the desire to give protection to the woman he loves. The invert knows she will never enjoy this" (qtd. in Parkes 441). This belief reinforces the necessity of Stephen's close bond with her father, Sir Philip, in the novel. Hall gives Stephen protection from her father, as Stephen will otherwise never receive the protection Hall believes she inherently desires from men.

Stephen's relationship with her father is one of both identification and desire. Stephen identifies with him both physically and emotionally. At seventeen years old, she



no longer looks like a child: “What change there was only tended to strengthen the extraordinary likeness between father and daughter, for now...as the childish fullness had gradually diminished, the formation of the resolute jaw was Sir Philip’s. His too the strong chin with its shade of a cleft; the well modeled, sensitive lips were his also” (Hall 72). Stephen looks like a young Sir Philip, and her closeness with him extends to an emotional level as well, that begins when Stephen is a young child: “Sir Philip and his daughter would walk on the hill-sides, in and out of the blackthorn and young green bracken; they would walk hand in hand with a deep sense of friendship, with a deep sense of mutual understanding” (Hall 25). Sir Philip is whom Stephen frequently turns to confide in and seek advice from as a young child. After his death, Stephen feels vulnerable: “she realized how greatly she had leant on that man of deep kindness, how sure she had felt of his constant protection, how much she had taken that protection for granted” (Hall 121). Sir Philip’s role in the novel is that of Stephen’s protector, and it’s soon after his death that Stephen begins to discover more about her own identity as an outsider.

#### The discourse of sexology in 1928 and present-day understandings of transgender

Stephen’s character, her personality, and the qualities of her inversion, follow the guidelines set forth by the sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Richard von Krafft-Ebing was the first to define four different divisions of lesbianism, and then Havelock Ellis published *Sexual Inversion*, the second volume of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, in German in 1896 in which he studied inversion in both women and

men. The volume was written with John Addington Symonds,<sup>2</sup> and translated into English in 1897. The book is considered “the first English medical textbook on homosexuality,” (Crozier) and it clarifies and develops much of Krafft-Ebing’s work, while also reinforcing that inversion exists on a spectrum (Newton 566-567). Sir Philip’s character in *The Well of Loneliness* reaffirms how important Hall took the work of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sexologists to be, as he consults these volumes himself (Prosser 131). Sir Philip has a passion for books and scholarship, and Stephen discovers that he studied some of the sexologists’ work when she visits his study several years after his death: “Krafft Ebing—she had never heard of that author before. All the same she opened the battered old book, then she looked more closely, for there on its margins were notes in her father’s small, scholarly hand and she saw that her own name appeared in those notes... ‘You knew! All the time you knew this thing!’” (Hall 204). Hall cites Krafft-Ebing in the text to signal that Stephen’s character’s traits stem from discourse that resulted from his work. Additionally, Sir Philip’s notes in the margins confirm that Stephen’s traits follow the guidelines detailed on the pages.

In the introduction to *Sexual Inversion*, Ellis explains: “Sexual inversion, as here understood, means sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality towards persons of the same sex” (Ellis 1). Ellis states that someone who identifies with the gender that does not correspond to his or her biological sex will have homosexual desire. In reading Ellis’ *Sexual Inversion in Women*, it is clear that Stephen’s character is greatly based off of Ellis’ writing. While describing the qualities common among sexually inverted women, Ellis explains: “there is nearly always a disdain for the petty feminine

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<sup>2</sup> While the volume was co-authored, all citations will be written in Ellis’ name for the purpose of this essay, as he is traditionally credited with the work.

artifices of the toilet...the brusque, energetic movements, the attitude of the arms, the direct speech...will often suggest the underlying psychic abnormality...In the habits not only is there frequently a pronounced taste for smoking cigarettes...there is often some capacity for athletics” (Ellis 250). Stephen is a heavy smoker, and also a gifted fencer and rider, who began to enjoy dressing up in boys’ clothes as a young child. Ellis also comments on how inversion can be first seen in children: “a girl forms an ardent attachment for another girl, probably somewhat older than herself, often a schoolfellow, sometimes her schoolmistress, upon whom she will lavish an astonishing amount of affection and devotion” (Ellis 217). When Stephen is a child, she develops a passionate love for her housemaid, Collins: “Stephen entered a completely new world, that turned on an axis of Collins” (Hall 18). Stephen’s obsession with Collins continues to grow, until it ultimately gets her in trouble. One day she sees Collins and Henry, the footman, kissing, and she responds by violently throwing a flowerpot at them. Hall uses *Sexual Inversion* in her creation of other characters as well, such as Stephen’s two love interests, Angela and Mary:

A class in which homosexuality, while fairly distinct, is only slightly marked, is formed by the women to whom the actively inverted woman is most attracted. These women differ, in the first place, from the normal, or average woman in that they are not repelled or disgusted by lover-like advances from persons of their own sex...Their sexual impulses are seldom well marked, but they are of strongly affectionate nature. On the whole, they are women who are not very robust and well developed, physically or nervously...they are always womanly. (Ellis 222)

Both Angela and Mary are overtly feminine women, and Mary is often described as naïve, needy, and childlike: “[Mary] was young and completely ignorant of life; she knew only that she loved, and the young were ardent. She would give all that Stephen would ask of her and more...And through giving all she would be left defenseless,

neither forewarned nor forearmed against a world that would turn like a merciless beast and rend her” (Hall 300-301). Mary and Angela are clearly distinct from the sexual invert, but also from each other. Mary represents the traditional homosexual woman as detailed by Ellis. Stephen’s relationship with Angela, on the other hand, is never consummated, and Angela is simultaneously having an affair with Roger Antrim. She is better categorized as a sensualist who is intrigued by Stephen and entertained by their affair. Angela is, therefore, the woman who is “not repelled or disgusted by lover-like advances from persons of their own sex” (Ellis 222).

Hall understood the importance of adhering to the rules and guidelines of legible sexual inversion in her novel as detailed by the well-known sexologists of her time. In fact, she reached out to Ellis asking for his support and approval of *The Well of Loneliness*, in the hopes that his authority would “lend the project legitimacy” (Doan and Prosser 2). What resulted is Ellis’ “Commentary” which is published as a preface in the book. He praises Hall and the novel, writing:

So far as I know, it is the first English novel which presents, in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us to-day. The relation of certain people—who, while different from their fellow human beings, are sometimes of the highest character and finest aptitudes—to the often hostile society in which they move, presents difficult and still unsolved problems. (Ellis 6)

The “Commentary” is written using vague and unspecific language, which renders it less powerful. For instance, Ellis writes “certain people,” instead of using the term “sexual inverts,” and he does not elaborate on any of his points, such as the ways in which society is “hostile” (Doan and Prosser 3).

The discourse surrounding sexology and homosexuality has grown and evolved since Ellis’s work and *The Well of Loneliness*’s publication in 1928. While the novel has

been labeled “a 1920s classic of lesbian fiction,” (Hall front cover) a reader of the novel in 2015 would be less likely to label Stephen as a lesbian, and more likely to label her as transgender: “*The Well of Loneliness* has proven the most famous representation of lesbianism that yet provides the most infamous *misrepresentation* of lesbianism” (Prosser 129). While *The Well of Loneliness* has been considered the quintessential lesbian novel, Stephen’s character is different from that of a female who desires another female, or the traditional female homosexual, especially when she is considered in comparison to Mary. Mary doesn’t cross-dress or experience any kind of identification with masculine ideals or traits. On the contrary, she is traditionally feminine. Stephen’s story is based in her desire to change genders and her discomfort in her body. Stephen frequently thinks of how her life would have been improved if she were born male: “[A] ‘should have been’ narrative is repeated like a mantra in the novel” (Prosser 134). This is apparent at her birth, as her parents insist on giving her a traditionally male name, and over the course of her childhood: “Do you think that I *could* be a man, supposing that I thought very hard—or prayed, father?” (Hall 26). This sentiment continues into Stephen’s adulthood, when she confesses to her mother: “I can’t feel that I am a woman. All my life I’ve never felt like a woman” (Hall 201). Hall’s contemporaries mislabeled Stephen’s story because Ellis’s work conflates gender inversion with homosexual desire: “the devaluation of gender inversion as homosexuality has derived from and amounted to a failure to distinguish narratives” (Prosser 131). Because Stephen’s narrative is exemplified by her distress in her body, the term “lesbian” does not adequately describe Stephen, but rather “transgender” because of the extent to which she identifies with masculinity.

The writing of *Orlando* and its initial success contrasted with the reception of *The Well of Loneliness*

On March 14, 1927, Virginia Woolf first mentions *Orlando: A Biography* in her diary, which is to be her next project: “For the truth is I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books...I want to kick up my heels and be off. I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons” (Woolf *Diary* 104). In 1927, Woolf published *To the Lighthouse*. Julia Stephen, Woolf’s mother who died when Woolf was thirteen years old, inspired Mrs. Ramsay, a character in the book (Lee 81). Woolf writes in her essay “A Sketch of the Past” that: “the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say...and when [*To the Lighthouse*] was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her” (Woolf “A Sketch of the Past” 80-81). Woolf expresses a desire to next write something that will have a less emotionally draining process, and is overall less serious and more fun.

Woolf writes in her diary about what this next novel will entail: “a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called *Orlando: Vita*; only with a change about from one sex to another” (Woolf *Diary* 114). Vita, whose name stands alone in this passage, refers to Vita Sackville-West, a fellow author with whom Woolf had an affair with from the years 1925-1935. In fact, Sackville-West was a “more popular and better-selling author” than Woolf in the 1920s (Lee 478-481). Sackville-West was married to Harold Nicolson, and they both had homosexual affairs. Sackville-West had many other affairs as well, in fact, and Woolf would “[play] down her jealousy of Vita’s other lovers” in her diary, while never giving details of their physical

relationship or mentioning her husband, Leonard Woolf's, feelings about her extramarital relationship (Lee 480-482). Woolf was inspired to write a novel that incorporated her impressions of Sackville-West as the two were different from each other in many ways:

"Virginia was the will o' the wisp, the invalid, the frail virgin, the 'ragamuffin' or 'scallywag,' the puritan, the sharp-eyed intellectual with the 'clever friends,' the talker, the wit. Vita was the rich, supple, luxurious, high-coloured, glowing, dusky, fruity, fiery, winy, passionate, striding, adventuring traveler; also dumb, dense, a 'donkey'" (Lee 479).

Additionally, Woolf was interested in Sackville-West's impressive family history:

The Sackville family went back to William the Conqueror; they were made Earls of Dorset in the sixteenth century, and granted the vast Kentish house of Knole by Elizabeth I. They were parliamentarians, ambassadors, royalists; Charles Sackville, 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Dorset, was a poet and literary patron. Then there was the great house, built over four acres, like a gigantic, palatial Oxford college, with (legend has it) seven courts, fifty-two staircases, and 365 rooms. Knole was Vita's first passion...and her greatest lost love (she could not inherit, as she was a woman). (Lee 481)

Many of these details, such as a house with 365 rooms, appear in *Orlando*. While Sackville-West acted as the inspiration for the character of Orlando, Woolf does not portray her in a wholly flattering manner. In fact, Lady Sackville, Vita's mother, found the novel to be malicious. She wrote to Woolf: "You have written some beautiful phrases in *Orlando*, but probably you do not realize how *cruel* you have been" (qtd. in Lee 513). Additionally, Woolf gives Orlando strong feminist beliefs that Sackville-West did not have herself (Lee 515-516). Hermione Lee writes in her biography of Woolf that: "Vita is made love to, but she is also made over: her characteristics are exploited. Where Vita was romantic, private and gloomy, *Orlando* is showy, glittering, witty, and camp" (Lee 516). *Orlando* represents a complicated portrayal, as it is one filled both with flattery and criticism, exaggeration and simplification.

Woolf shocks herself with the speed and intensity with which she is able to work on this novel. On October 22, 1927, she mentions in her diary that she has completely devoted herself to her writing of *Orlando*, and claims that she has “done nothing, nothing, nothing else for a fortnight...[I am] in the thick of the greatest rapture known to me” (Woolf *Diary* 115). Woolf’s diary entries surrounding the writing of this novel are filled with joy and enthusiasm, and she notes the lightheartedness of the experience: “I have written this book quicker than any; and it is all a joke; and yet gay and quick reading I think; a writer’s holiday” (Woolf *Diary* 122).

Woolf calls the final product “a freak” (Woolf *Diary* 124), and in consideration with *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), decides that *Orlando* is: “not, I think, ‘important’ among my works” (Woolf *Diary* 125). However, on November 7, 1928, less than a month after the book’s publication, she writes: “This is the aftermath...of *Orlando*. Yes, yes: since I wrote here I have become two inches and a half higher in the public view” (Woolf *Diary* 132). The advance sales for the book were weak, despite Woolf’s established reputation, because it was titled *Orlando: A Biography*, and therefore put in the biography section in stores, as opposed to being placed with the fiction (Lee 509). Despite their slow start, the sales for *Orlando* picked up quickly: she notes that the sales were “beyond our record for the first week” (Woolf *Diary* 131). Woolf received, therefore, both positive critical and financial reception for the novel. She doesn’t, however, allow herself to feel overly confident: on December 18, 1928, she comments on the sales: “always to my surprise. Will they stop or go on? Anyhow my room is secure. For the first time since I married, 1912-1928—16 years, I have been spending money” (Woolf *Diary* 137).



While Woolf was enjoying the success of her recently published novel, Hall was simultaneously defending the right of hers to be read. Hall was receiving support from many female readers, especially after the attention her trial generated, who sent letters thanking Hall for writing *The Well of Loneliness* (Dellamora 191). In a personal letter, Woolf describes *The Well of Loneliness* as “stagnant and lukewarm and neither one thing or the other.” Additionally, Woolf and many other members of the “Bloomsbury group” were asked to defend *The Well of Loneliness* in Hall’s trial. Woolf was pleased when she ultimately didn’t have to testify at “the bloody woman’s trial” (qtd. in Parkes 435): “This last, to my relief, was decided against us: we could not be called as experts in obscenity, only in art” (qtd. in Parkes 435). Moreover, as a writer, Woolf defended the superiority of modernism over the “traditions of Victorian and Edwardian realism from which modernism distinguished itself” (Green 278). *Orlando* is a modernist novel, and when Orlando changes from male to female, Woolf deliberately pokes fun at gender norms and the studies of the contemporary sexologists, and therefore at Hall’s unwavering insistence on using Havelock Ellis’ work as an aid for her writing (Green 436). *Orlando*’s modernist style was a component that helped protect the book from an obscenity trial such as Hall’s. With a plot that spans 350 years, *Orlando* isn’t grounded in reality (DiBattista *lix*). Woolf also ridicules the traditional biography, by titling her book *Orlando: A Biography* (Lee 516). Not only in her titling, but also throughout the entirety of the novel there is an air of fun: there is a “vacillation between the comic and the serious” (Parkes 446). Hall’s novel, on the other hand, has a more serious tone, and her “decision to set the novel within contemporary England upped the ante. So also did the author’s decision to play with aspects of her own life in representing that of Stephen

Gordon” (Dellamora 190). With no distractions in form or content, readers more easily understood what Hall was addressing.

#### Orlando’s transition from male to female as superficial

The turning point of *Orlando* occurs when the protagonist, without any prior indication as to why, wakes up and has become a woman (DiBattista *lix*). A dramatic scene of transition unfolds in which nothing is stable. Orlando is serving as an ambassador in Constantinople in the seventeenth century, and is in the process of becoming a duke; however, during the ceremony, everything descends into chaos: “the harsh cries of the prophets were heard above the shouts of the people; many Turks fell flat to the ground and touched the earth with their foreheads. A door burst open. The natives pressed into the banqueting rooms. Women shrieked” (Woolf 97). Orlando then retreats to his bedroom, and sleeps for seven days, causing great panic to those who work with him as they try repeatedly to wake him. On the seventh day, the Lady of Purity, Lady of Chastity, and Lady of Modesty appear in Orlando’s room (representing three key ideals of womanhood in the seventeenth century), and they aid in orchestrating his change into a woman. As the scene of transition continues, the Ladies of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty all attempt to cast their values onto the sleeping Orlando, indicating that they believe a woman needs these three qualities, but a group of trumpeters consistently appear to turn them away. The Ladies’ presence in the scene indicates that Orlando did not naturally possess these societal ideals of womanhood. Society attempts to attach its

values onto Orlando so that they can justify his new womanhood. As the scene goes on, Orlando eventually rises:

The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast:—  
“THE TRUTH!”  
at which Orlando woke. (Woolf 102)

The narrator is quick to reassure the readers that Orlando’s identity is unchanged: “Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been” (Woolf 102). The scene of transformation in *Orlando* initially seems to contradict the notion that Orlando remains the same, as it is filled with language that indicates Orlando’s destiny is being fulfilled: “The Truth and nothing but the Truth” (Woolf 101). However, this language, or this “truth,” does not necessarily imply that Orlando was meant to be a woman. The narrator acknowledges that there are many ways to interpret Orlando’s change of gender, and there are some people who will assume that she hasn’t changed, or was never a man to begin with; the narrator refutes these possibilities: “It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since” (Woolf 103). This is a mater-of-fact statement that the narrator gives to clarify what has just occurred. The narrator is also referring to the fact that Orlando never previously questioned his gender identity nor showed discomfort in being a man. The scene, in fact, mocks the idea of a gender “truth” (Parkes 436), just as Woolf mocks the traditional biography throughout the text, as Orlando wakes up and is not surprised at her new body: “Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without

showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath” (Woolf 102).<sup>3</sup>

The gender change ceremony in Orlando’s bedroom is dramatic, but Orlando is calm when she wakes up from her long sleep (Crawford 178).

Orlando’s change from male into female is one that exists primarily on the surface, and Orlando proves that she understands the instability of gender identity. The narrator steps back from the action of the scene to takes a moment to explain the necessary transition from male to female pronouns:

Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as *he* had been. The change of sex, though it altered *their* future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity. *Their* face remained, as *their* portraits prove, practically the same. His memory—but in the future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he,’—*her* memory then, went back through all the events of *her* past life. (Woolf 102-103, emphasis added)

The narrator emphasizes an additional time that Orlando, with the exception of gender, is the same as she always has been. In this passage, we see the slow transition of the pronouns used to describe Orlando. The narrator first uses “he” despite the fact that the transformation is already complete, and this effectively links Orlando to the man she once was. Then the narrator then transitions to “their” for two sentences, which gives the character a moment of neutrality—Orlando is represented as neither a man nor a woman. Orlando is, however, briefly represented in the plural. The use of “their” also implies the presence of both the male and female in the female persona that Orlando now is. Finally, the narrator explains that the switch from male to female pronouns is one of “convention,” and therefore required by society. Judith Butler, in her writing on gender

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<sup>3</sup> This passage occurs after Orlando has been transformed into a woman, but before Woolf has switched to using female pronouns to describe Orlando, hence the Woolf’s use of “himself” and “his.”

performativity, reinforces this idea in 1988, 60 years after *Orlando*'s publication, in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." She writes: "gender cannot be understood as...[an expression or disguise for] an interior 'self'" (Butler 528). One's self or identity is completely independent from gender identification, Butler explains, and thus Orlando's being a woman will not change her interior mind or personality.

Woolf asserts that Orlando's physical body does not restrain her in any way. Butler's statement that: "One is not simply a body...one does one's body" (Butler 521) agrees with this sentiment, as it indicates that one has control over how one performs gender physically. Orlando has made a conscious effort to control her body, and has therefore desired her change from male to female. Butler states that to be a woman is: "to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (Butler 522). This idea indicates that everyone, whether they are heterosexual, homosexual, or transgender, makes a choice, and adheres to the standards of a certain role. Therefore: "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity institutionalized through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 519). This applies to the heterosexual as much as it does to a homosexual or transgender person: every identity requires the playing of a role. Butler continues: "Consider gender...as a *corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative" (Butler 521-522). The body, she claims, presents itself as either male or female, depending on the person: it

involves only a mentality and an awareness of societal expectations of gender. Woolf anticipates Butler's theory in Orlando's change, as she creates a character which transitions smoothly from one gender to another.

The narrator's clarification immediately after the scene of transformation indicates that this change in gender should not be read as revolutionary as it may seem on the surface, despite that the scene is filled with pomp and circumstance. In fact, the scene reinforces Orlando's ability to adapt. Lucas Crawford, a critic who has written on transgender affect in *Orlando* in 2015, argues that *Orlando* is an essential text in "transgender history," and his work is useful in analyzing the extent to which Orlando chooses to change into a woman. Crawford explains:

We may understand the "sex change" of the text less as a definitive event and more as a symptom or actualization of the undercurrent of affective transformation that is the undercurrent of the text's (and the protagonist's) energy. This is to say that it is possible that a "sex change"...might be something other than traumatic if this desire was (and was regarded as) the result or reward of one's high capacity for being affected. In *Orlando: A Biography*, Woolf shows us this: she configures gender-change as just one legible event of the ever-changing body. (Crawford 177)

Crawford's commentary emphasizes a desire within Orlando to change because it was the necessary thing for her to do in this moment. Orlando changes gender immediately after a dukedom ceremony gone horribly wrong, in which the people of Constantinople were disappointed in her ("the people had expected a miracle—some say a shower of gold was prophesied to fall from the skies" (Woolf 97)) and then revolted. Orlando's change into a woman can be read as an active choice, as the transformation is a result of feeling empathy for the spectrum of gender identities. Crawford details empathy's requirements as:

First, the presumed division between subject and object disappears, which means that one's self-ownership has been "felt" across. Secondly, one becomes able to project oneself to somewhere one is not, which means that one's environment (immediate or distant) becomes paramount to one's affective life... Third, one is able to imagine oneself as something other, the very affective grounds necessary for transformation (gender or otherwise). (Crawford 169)

Orlando, he explains, is able to transition from male to female because she can identify fully with the idea of being a woman, and allows herself to become one. "Sex change" is not an adequate term to precisely describe Orlando's transition, as she is merely changing and evolving, which Woolf argues in this novel that all people do to some extent. Change and evolution are necessary and natural for Orlando's character. This is because Orlando's life spans centuries, and at the close of the novel we reach 1928, Woolf's present day, and Orlando is only in her thirties. As Orlando lives through many centuries and in many places in the world throughout her life, she is constantly in a state of reinvention: "For Woolf, the 'sex change' is a portion of the 'continuous' 'transition' that Orlando undergoes as an affectively capacious body... Orlando's tendencies are to adapt, to constantly re-edit the literature he writes, to feverishly decorate, and to feel across time and senses" (Crawford 178). The final chapter of the novel supports this argument, as Woolf emphasizes the multiplicity present in all humans. She writes:

For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two... Come, come! I'm sick of this particular self. I want another. Hence, the astonishing changes we see in our friends. (Woolf 225)

At the end of the novel Woolf justifies Orlando's change in gender by classifying it as something simple and necessary for Orlando.

Homosexuality in *Orlando* and *The Well of Loneliness*

Both *The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando* are regarded as quintessential texts of homosexuality and gender-difference. However, the novels present these topics differently. Their greatest difference is that there is a change in *Orlando* and that in *The Well of Loneliness* there isn't an evolution of identity. Rather, this text presents several different examples of homosexuality. Stephen is the protagonist whom readers in 1928 saw as a homosexual. Stephen is not the only invert in the text, as there is also her effeminate male friend, Brockett, and his character provides readers with a comparison to Stephen. Additionally, Mary and Angela, due to their clearly expressed femininity, represent a different experience of homosexuality than Stephen, and from each other as well. Orlando, on the other hand, does not experience gender inversion, as Orlando never feels as if she were "born in the wrong body" (Crawford 165). In fact, Orlando consistently finds advantages and disadvantages in both the male and female gender identity. Any struggles Orlando faces as a woman stem from her society's expectation of what is required of a woman, not of Orlando's discomfort with her own body. Orlando's constant and consistent evolution over the course of centuries divides the experiences of Stephen and Orlando. Stephen cannot understand the perspective of multiple identities in the way that Orlando can after becoming a woman.

Homosexuality plays a role in *Orlando*, but operates in a different way than in *The Well of Loneliness* where it is conflated with gender inversion. After Orlando becomes a woman, she considers Sasha, a Russian princess that she falls in love with at the opening of the novel: "though [Orlando] was herself a woman, it was still a woman



she loved: and if the consciousness of being the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings...For now a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark” (Woolf 119-120). This emphasizes that one cannot truly understand someone without knowing the experience of their gender. This is a complicated statement, as it implies that Orlando is the same as when she was a man, while simultaneously having more knowledge now as a woman. Orlando’s desire for Sasha has switched from heterosexual desire to homosexual desire. An issue arises in arguing that Orlando is *fully* unchanged as a woman when she examines her love for Sasha and considers this passion: “Now, the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed...At last, she cried, she knew Sasha as she was” (Woolf 120). Orlando’s love for Sasha is affected and intensified, as Orlando can now more closely identify with Sasha. However, Orlando’s love is not changed by her identification as a woman as opposed to that as a man, but instead is modified by her new understanding of the full spectrum of gender identity. She has now lived and experienced society in both a male body and a female body, and has begun to understand how society responds differently to her female body versus her former male body. Therefore, she can understand Sasha’s quotidian life more fully as she is now more capable of imagining Sasha’s perspective, which is a female perspective. In her introduction for the novel, critic Maria DiBattista helps explain the evolution of the quality of Orlando’s desire for Sasha (as a result of her change in gender) as gynomorphosis, or “the transformation of male bodies and masculinity fictions into their equivalent—but different—female counterparts” (DiBattista *lx*). DiBattista emphasizes

that while Orlando's personality remains intact, certain aspects of her character are altered due to the difference in her gender.

### Clothing as a tool of gender expression for Stephen and Orlando

Both Woolf and Hall emphasize the roles that clothing and dress play in the construction and presentation of their protagonist's gender identity. The novels both suggest the new idea that it is not one's body, but rather one's clothing and appearance that express gender identity. For instance, during Orlando's return to England, the biographer describes the changes in Orlando, who is now a woman, and notes that her new style of dress is particularly important: "Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us...there is much to support that clothes wear us and not we them" (Woolf 138). In this passage Woolf confirms that society often mistakenly views clothing as something frivolous and petty. She asserts that clothing has more power over how the wearer sees the world than how the wearer is seen. This implies that one views society differently when dressed in a woman's attire than in a man's, and that clothing, not physical gender, shapes this power. Additionally, Woolf provides her readers with visual aids: photographs of Orlando mark her transformation and aging over the span of the novel. In fact, Vita Sackville-West is the model for several of these photos (DiBattista 253-254). Woolf's narrator is sure to stress that while the photos both feature Orlando, there are important differences to note between them:

If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are

certain changes. The man has his hand free to seize his sword; the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it... Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible their outlook might have been the same too. (Woolf 138-139)

The narrator cites clothing as the source of female restriction in this passage. She explains that Orlando's clothing has most affected her after the transformation from man into woman. Clothing acts as the surface negotiation of gender that is used in society: "In every human being a vacillation from one sex to another takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness" (Woolf 139). Orlando's change from men's clothing to women's is what most distinctly marks her transformation, or how she represents it to others, as she is otherwise the same person as before.

Woolf opens *Orlando* with an emphasis on clothing's ability to transform, as the first sentence of the novel reads: "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor" (Woolf 11). Readers are first alerted of the gender of Orlando, and the biographer then immediately asserts the importance of clothing in the Renaissance, the time period at the opening of the novel, but also indicates that clothing will continue to be a tool that shapes the protagonist's identity and perceptions. It is also noteworthy that we are introduced to Orlando as he is participating in a violent act while wearing the contemporary androgynous clothing. In this opening scene, Orlando is a man, but one wouldn't recognize this from his clothing, and so it is necessary for him to prove his masculinity with violence. While this is the case in the Renaissance, we will notice a change over the course of the coming centuries in how clothing has the ability to restrict in some cases, and to liberate in others. In terms of liberation, Orlando's first realizes the

power of female clothing on her journey home to England, where she discovers that she can manipulate how her clothing interacts with her body (such as how much of her body she chooses to reveal):

She tossed her foot impatiently, and showed an inch or two of calf. A sailor on the mast, who happened to look down at the moment, started so violently that he missed his footing and only saved himself by the skin of his teeth. "If the sight of my ankles means death to an honest fellow who, no doubt, has a wife and family to support, I must, in all humanity, keep them covered," Orlando thought. Yet her legs were among her chiefest beauties. (Woolf 116)

Orlando discovers that in her new female clothing, she will not be able to enjoy the privileges that she had when she was a man, as her female body is given more attention than her male body was. However, she now has the ability to seduce men, and to use her beauty as a tool of power. As a woman, she also understands that she can use clothing to conceal her body, something she never considered as a man. Orlando is able use dress to her advantage in this case, as she can choose how she influences the responses of those around her.

Like Orlando, Stephen uses clothing to express her gender identification, and in her case, how she is different from other women. Hall traces Stephen's relationship with clothing from childhood and over the course of her adulthood. As a young child, Stephen enjoyed dressing up in boys' clothing for fun, but would regret when she needed to put back on her girls' clothing:

And Stephen must slink upstairs thoroughly deflated, strangely unhappy and exceedingly humble, and must tear off the clothes she so dearly loved donning, to replace them by garments she hated. How she hated soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and small coral beads, and openwork stockings! Her legs felt so free and comfortable in breeches; she adored pockets too, and these were forbidden—at least really adequate pockets. (Hall 20)

Stephen is attracted to male clothing partially out of convenience: it is more comfortable for when she is riding horses and fencing. Stephen develops a negative relationship with traditional girls' clothing, and begins to associate her dislike for dresses with a dislike for the gendered ideals of womanhood. Additionally, Stephen equates female ideals to her mother, Anna Gordon, with whom she has a tense relationship. In fact, Stephen grows up to be the antithesis to Anna in many ways:

Anna is ultrafeminine, while Stephen...displays masculine traits. This primary division is held in place, however, through Hall's recourse to a secondary, also gendered, division: the division between the colonizer and the colonized. Hall's construction of Stephen's mother as avowedly and immutably Irish, in direct contrast to Stephen's masculine, logical Englishness, allows Hall to negotiate...[Stephen's] rejection of the female social roles Anna represents. (Backus 256)

Therefore, Stephen and Anna represent opposites in the novel. With Anna as overtly feminine, Stephen feels out of place in anything related to femininity. Backus states that Stephen's identification with the English and Anna's with the Irish emphasizes that there is a great divide between the two characters: "[Hall] articulates 'the lesbian' as 'the male,' 'the English,' and 'the subject' and places all four in opposition to 'the heterosexual,' 'the female,' 'the Irish,' and 'the object' as embodied in Anna Gordon. Anna's Irishness is exemplified by her role as mother and beloved, while Stephen's Englishness is exemplified in her hunting and riding" (Backus 257-258). The division between Irish and English that Stephen and Anna represent creates a greater division between Stephen and femininity in the novel.

As Stephen matures and begins to make her own decisions about how she wants to dress herself, she chooses more masculine clothing, despite any negative reactions from those around her. Stephen's clothing, as well as her outward appearance, signifies to

others that she deviates from the norm. She is physically strong from her years of riding and fencing, and Angela notes that she has the reputation of fencing in the style of a man. When Stephen and Mary are out together in Paris, passersby cite Stephen's distinct wardrobe as what they find to be unsettling about her: "A few people might stare at the tall, scarred woman in her well-tailored clothes and black slouch hat. They would stare first at her and then at her companion: '...Elle est belle, la petite; comme c'est rigolo!'" (Hall 326). In contrast with Mary's overtly feminine looks and style of dress, Stephen appears as more masculine in appearance. Together, as with Stephen's relationship with Angela, one member of the relationship takes on a feminine outward appearance and style of dress (as well as internal mentality and personality), and Stephen appears as physically masculine. Additionally, after moving away from her mother and Morton, Stephen changes the style of her hair which she had always hated: "Her hair was quite short. In a mood of defiance she had suddenly walked off to the barber's one morning and made him crop it close like a man's...Stephen had grown fond and proud of her hair...Sir Philip also had been proud of his hair in the days of his youthful manhood" (Hall 210). Stephen adopts a more traditionally masculine appearance in both her choice of hairstyle and clothing, and Hall also immediately equates Stephen to her father at Stephen's age, noting their similarities, and Stephen's identification with a masculine appearance.

The early twentieth century: how Orlando and Stephen interact with the institution of marriage

In *Orlando*, Woolf acknowledges the societal pressures that exist in the modern world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to [Orlando] in the extreme, and thus it took her and broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands as she had never been before” (Woolf 178). Orlando has now been alive for hundreds of years, and only in the nineteenth century does she feel the “spirit” of the time begin to affect her actions and her mentality. Orlando has otherwise transitioned smoothly from century to century, but now is shocked by her surroundings: “It now seemed to [Orlando] that the whole world was ringed with gold. She went in to dinner. Wedding rings abounded. She went to church. Wedding rings everywhere” (Woolf 176). Orlando finds that she can’t continue to avoid the social necessity of marriage for a woman, and this change in attitude emphasizes Orlando’s ability to evolve with her time (Crawford 178). In fact, she begins to feel the stress of the century physically:

She became conscious...of an extraordinary tingling vibration all over her, as if she were made of a thousand wires upon which some breeze or errant fingers were playing scales...But all this agitation seemed at length to concentrate in her hands; and then in one hand, and then in one finger of that hand...she saw nothing—nothing but the vast solitary emerald which Queen Elizabeth had given her...The vibration seemed...to say No, that is not enough...poor Orlando felt positively ashamed of the second finger of her left hand without in the least knowing why. (Woolf 175).

Orlando desires a wedding ring, but doesn’t mention actually wanting a spouse, only something that can signify to others that she is married. A ring that can imply marriage is now of greater value to her than a ring given to her personally by Queen Elizabeth, and

this speaks to the powerful role that marriage played in late nineteenth century British society. Orlando's body is responding to the absence of a wedding ring on her finger, which coincides with Butler's argument that: "the body *is* a historical situation" (Butler 521), or that one's body naturally responds to its time. This is also the very world in which Radclyffe Hall's Stephen exists. When Angela asks Stephen: "Could you marry me, Stephen?" (Hall 150), and when Stephen tricks Mary into leaving their relationship for a more secure future with Martin Hallam, the readers understand the significance of marriage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century British societies.

#### The hardships Stephen and Orlando face as women writers in the twentieth century

Stephen and Orlando's awareness of marital expectations emphasizes that they are both cognizant of the dominant social forces of their societies. The pressures of the time also greatly restrict Stephen and Orlando in their writing, a significant mode of expression for them both. *Orlando* and *The Well of Loneliness* are both very much about what it means to be a female writer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and as Orlando and Stephen are both writers, they share many of the same struggles in their writing and publishing. Tracing Orlando's writing process shows an evolution of how she is affected by the times, as Orlando began to write during the Renaissance when she was a man and continues to write over the span of several centuries. After becoming a woman, Orlando's passion and desire to write does not stop, so Woolf shows that it is possible for a woman to be a writer. However, Orlando's experience writing is slightly altered after becoming a woman. In her article "Virginia Woolf's Feminist



Historiography in *Orlando*,” Jane de Gay traces how Orlando’s writing changes over the passing decades of the novel and after her transformation from a man to a woman. She writes: “Woolf shows that [gender] is a significant factor determining how people write...[*Orlando*] depicts an aspiring writer...who does not receive recognition until the twentieth century” (de Gay 64). When Orlando is a woman, she doesn’t want others to see her in the act of writing or her manuscripts: “Orlando hid her manuscripts when interrupted...She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains” (Woolf 137-138). De Gay notes that this hiding on her manuscript is: “an anecdote from the life of Jane Austen which Woolf cited in *A Room of One’s Own*” (de Gay 65). This passage greatly contrasts with Orlando’s behavior as a male writer, as early in the novel he invites his favorite poet, Nick Greene, who is a well-respected writer, to visit him at his house to discuss and critique his own work. We see that it only becomes more difficult for Orlando to write and publish after she becomes a woman and as time passes. Orlando attempts to ignore the “spirit of the age” when she is writing, but she carefully considers her obstacles in writing and how they connect to her new obligations as a wife: “if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts” (Woolf 195). Orlando has already recognized that she wants to be married in order to adhere to the social expectations of her community, and she is satisfied when she meets Shelmerdine, whom she quickly marries. However, her marriage presents her with a new problem as a writer: Orlando could write as a woman, although with great and added difficulty; as a wife, she is not sure whether she should be writing at all. It is specifically her status as a woman that causes her to question whether it is proper for her to write her poetry.

Orlando is not questioning her ability to write or whether the content of her work has any literary value when she wonders whether a man's wife can acceptably be a writer, but rather whether she can uphold her duties and obligations as a wife if she feels so passionately about writing poetry. Orlando never needed to be told to start writing, but instead, took up writing as a young man because: "an ineffable hope, all of the turbulence of his youth, all of his clumsiness, his blushes, his long walks, and his love of the country proved that he himself belonged to the sacred race rather than to the noble—was by birth a writer, rather than an aristocrat, possessed him. For the first time since the night of the great flood he was happy" (Woolf 62). Writing has always brought Orlando joy and contentedness, and she felt that it suited her personality, so she began to pursue it.

Orlando does not question the merit of the content of her writing here, which is a privilege that Stephen does not have in *The Well of Loneliness*. Throughout her career, Stephen occasionally requires encouragement and reassurance that her writing is of value. For instance, Stephen's friend Brockett visits her and Puddle, Stephen's childhood governess who eventually becomes her devoted friend, in their shared London apartment, and he criticizes Stephen's second book, claiming that it is a huge disappointment.

Stephen responds by asking: "What must I do to save my work?" for she realized that he had been speaking the stark, bitter truth; that indeed she had needed no one to tell her that her last book had been altogether unworthy—a poor, lifeless thing, having no health in it" (Hall 231-232). When Brockett suggests that Stephen uproot herself and move to Paris in order to see more of the world, she takes his advice, and she moves with the now elderly Puddle to France, in order to do what someone else tells her will help her writing. There is an essential difference between the role of encouragement in the writing processes of

Stephen and Orlando: Orlando seeks aid from Nick Greene early in the novel, but continues to write throughout her life, despite the negative interaction he has with Greene initially. While she struggles to write as a woman, she perseveres nonetheless. Stephen, on the other hand, must be repeatedly encouraged and promised that her work and focus on inversion and her personal experiences are important and will be of literary merit. Puddle, Mary, and other friends of Stephen's all contribute to Stephen's writing and publication process.

Despite her insecurity and vulnerability, Stephen is a prolific writer (much more so than Orlando), and publishes several novels over the course of *The Well of Loneliness*, her first and most successful being titled *The Furrow*. Puddle encourages Stephen early in her writing career: "You may write with a curious double insight—write both men and women from a personal knowledge...For the sake of all the others who are like you, but less strong and less gifted perhaps, many of them, it's up to you to have the courage to make good" (Hall 205). There are, therefore, many similarities between the agendas of Hall and Stephen. In fact, Una Troubridge, Hall's partner for an extended period of time, wrote a memoir about Hall in which she describes Hall's connection to Stephen: "Many of Stephen Gordon's feelings and reactions, though practically none of her circumstances or experiences, were...[Hall's] own" (qtd. in Dellamora 190). Furthermore, as Stephen received encouragement from Puddle to write about her personal story as an invert, Hall received support and reassurance from Troubridge about the importance of sharing aspects of her life (Dellamora 190).

Stephen's process of writing consumes her fully, as she writes all night, often refuses to eat, and Puddle organizes all her affairs: "Stephen's life in London had been

one long endeavour, for work to her had become a narcotic” (Hall 210). Puddle notices that Stephen is constantly tired, disagreeable, and “had lost the look of wind and sunshine—the open-air look” (Hall 210). Stephen’s writing process intensely alters her life; the narrator comments that: “*The Furrow* had been the result of a shock to which she had, strangely enough, reacted by a kind of unnatural mental vigour” (Hall 216). Stephen struggles with writing in that she cannot both write well and function well. Many of Stephen’s intense struggles with writing stem from her identity as an invert, as she expresses worry that she has never been a part of conventional (heterosexual) romantic relationship, and that her writing lacks knowledge and commentary on what she considers (or what society insists) to be an essential part of human existence. She also considers the fact that her relationship with Angela was never consummated. After Stephen’s mother finds out about Stephen and Angela’s past relationship, Stephen and Puddle move away from Morton; after they have settled into their life in London, Stephen quickly becomes frustrated with her writing. She confesses to Puddle:

There’s a great chunk of life that I’ve never known, and I want to know it, I ought to know it if I’m to become a really fine writer....Why should I live in this great isolation of spirit and body—why should I, why? Why have I been afflicted with a body that must never be indulged, that must always be repressed until it grows stronger much than my spirit because of this unnatural repression?...And now it’s attacking my holy of holies, my work—I shall never be a great writer because of my maimed and insufferable body. (Hall 217)

Despite Stephen’s tireless efforts, she thinks that her work can never be sufficient, and this is directly a result of her identity. She views inversion as something that she has been cursed with, not as an element of her writer’s identity. Stephen eventually overcomes her hesitation that her writing will never be of value, and she continues to write and produce,

but her hesitation and self-deprecation are important as they stem from her recognition of herself as an outsider.

### The classification of these novels and their places in the literary canon

Through the protagonists' own writing, as well as their interactions with literature, *Orlando* and *The Well of Loneliness* both comment on the state of their contemporary literature and on the literary traditions that preceded their publication. At the end of *Orlando*, Orlando coincidentally runs into the poet Nick Greene, who has also lived through several centuries, and he gives her his opinion on the literature of their time, the twentieth century:

Ah! my dear lady, the great days of literature are over. Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson—those were the giants. Dryden, Pope, Addison—those were the heroes. All, all are dead now...all our young writers are in the pay of booksellers. They turn out any trash that serves to pay their tailor's bills. It is an age...marked by precious conceits and wild experiments—none of which the Elizabethans would have tolerated for an instant...the great days are over. We live in degenerate times. (Woolf 204-205)

All of the exemplary writers that Greene cites are men, and he leaves no room for Orlando, or any female writer for that matter, to join the canon of celebrated authors, as he states definitively that there will be no more brilliant writers. Additionally, he insults the experimental writing of Woolf and other modernists, of which *Orlando* is a product. In this passage, Woolf critiques her contemporaries who do not believe in new forms of writing and literature and do not open the literary canon to include new traditions, styles, and authors, such as, in theory, women like Orlando. Similarly, Hall critiques the lack of literature including protagonists in serious romantic relationships that aren't strictly

heterosexual, hence her creation of Stephen who writes “for the sake of all the others who are like [herself]” (Hall 205). Both Woolf and Hall produce in these two novels exactly what they indicate is missing in twentieth century British literature.

The commentary in these novels about the current state of literature in 1928 causes one to wonder about where *The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando* find their places in the literary canon. “Transgender” is a broad term that includes a range of possible manifestations: “The term ‘transgender’ includes transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens, gender benders and all gender blenders, whether [heterosexual or homosexual], who in their cross-dressing and sex-changing ‘transgress’ the binary divide between the sexes” (Ekins and King preface). The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), published in 2013, describes the conditions necessary for gender dysphoria, which is an official diagnosis within the umbrella term of transgender:

For a person to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria, there must be a marked difference between the individual’s expressed/experienced gender and the gender others would assign him or her, and it must continue for at least six months. In children, the desire to be of the other gender must be present and verbalized. This condition causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. (DSM-5)

Earlier editions of the DSM used the title “gender identity disorder,” as opposed to gender dysphoria, and so the discourse from the American Psychiatric Association is no longer rooted in “disorder” (DSM-5). The DSM-5 continues: “Gender dysphoria is manifested in a variety of ways, including strong desires to be treated as the other gender or to be rid of one’s sex characteristics, or a strong conviction that one has feelings and reactions typical of the other gender” (DSM-5). Using this definition for gender dysphoria, we are able to differentiate the experiences of the protagonists in *Orlando* and *The Well of Loneliness*. *The Well of Loneliness* was regarded as a lesbian novel, both

famously and infamously, by operating under the conventional codes of sexology of the time. However, considering it a pioneer in transgender literature, specifically under the realm of gender dysphoria due to Stephen's discomfort in her body, much more accurately represents this work. In *Orlando*, on the other hand, the protagonist does not meet the requirements for gender dysphoria. While the novel's turning point is Orlando's transition from a male body to a female body, this transition is not one of Orlando's long-term desires. Instead, it is a transition that occurs as a part of the character's evolution. Orlando's change from male to female is willful in that she understands the performativity of gender, and it occurs after a travesty in Orlando's life, but it is not one that Orlando has been contemplating for any extended period of time. In fact, DiBattista stresses in the novel's introduction that:

[Orlando] loves indiscriminately in the "low style"—seeking out loose women boldly prowling the London docks, "marrying" a gypsy, to name just a few episodes in his happily promiscuous life—and poetically in the "high style," sublimating his attraction to highborn women in sonnets addressed to Clorinda, Favilla, Euphrosyne, and conceiving a grand and violent passion for a Russian princess. (DiBattista *lix*)

Orlando's life as a man is a comfortable one in which he is able to enjoy his male privilege. His identity is not shaped by an unyielding desire to change his male body into a female one, and so Orlando's story should not be classified as one of gender dysphoria.

*Orlando's* relationship with the term "transgender" is not as easily (or clinically) defined as in *The Well of Loneliness*. However, "transgender" applies to: "anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or who has a gender identity at odds with the labels 'man' or 'woman'" (Whittle xi). Orlando cannot be labeled as wholly a man or wholly a woman: at the close of the novel, Orlando has

successfully performed both gender identities. The narrator alludes to Orlando's many identities at the end of the novel:

For [Orlando] had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand...Orlando may now have called on the boy who cut the nigger's head down; the boy who strung it up again; the boy who sat on the hill; the boy who saw the poet; the boy who handed the Queen the bowl of rose water; or she may have called upon the young man who fell in love with Sasha...or she may have wanted the woman to come to her; the Gipsy; the Fine Lady; the Hermit; the girl in love with life...all these selves were different and she may have called upon any one of them. (Woolf 226)

Orlando consistently evolves and changes over the course of the novel, and her body or time never restricts her. The narrator confirms that all of these various identities of Orlando's are valid: she was once a man and is now a woman, while always retaining the same personality. She can return to any of her many identities when she so desires. Due to her oscillation between identities, "transgender" is therefore a broad way to label Orlando's almost indefinable experience with gender identity.

### Conclusion

Both Hall's and Woolf's novels were important in 1928 due to the many ways in which they pointed out and critiqued the obstacles women, as well as people who weren't heterosexual, faced in their societies. Additionally, they also both emphasized how gender presentation is artificially constructed. Woolf continues to be a canonized and distinguished author, due to her crucial role in the movement of literary modernism. *Orlando* is an important novel as it's different from many of Woolf's previous novels in its imaginative plot and playfulness. The novel was revolutionary in its time, and it



continues to be a widely read and celebrated novel today. While *The Well of Loneliness* was radical in 1928 for its focus on Stephen Gordon, the sexual invert, the novel is particularly relevant again in 2015, when discussions on gender identity, as well as homosexual, women, and transgendered peoples' rights, dominate both popular culture and academic studies. While *The Well of Loneliness* was radical and shocking in 1928, its importance has grown, and it is now a significant pioneer in transgender literature, especially in terms of gender dysphoria. It can be used to better understand the experience and representation of a transgendered person, particularly one whose biological sex is female, in the first half of the twentieth century. The initial response to the novel, as well as the mislabeling of it in 1928, exemplifies the extent to which the discourse surrounding sexuality has evolved. Finally, the reading of the novels presented here was not possible until now, due to the constant evolution of understandings of gender identification and sexuality, as well as the many subcategories that exist within the term "transgender."

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